

Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley remarks to the UMass Boston Class of 2019

May 31, 2019

Good Morning!

Thank you for this very humbling award, I accept it not for work I've already done, but as a commitment to the work we will do in the future.

Thank you to the University of Massachusetts Boston, thank you to President Meehan, thank you to Chancellor Emeritus Keith Motley, thank you to Chancellor Newman, the Trustees, alumni, faculty and staff and every person who previously and currently contributes to this unique institution. From Charlie Titus to Phil Carver, the trotter, the Gaston, the McCormack. Thank you to our adjunct professors, to our coaches, to the security officers, to our custodians, to our food service workers, and most of all thank YOU to you, our graduates, the class of 2019.

What a glorious sight you all are to behold. This crowd, this audience, looks like the beautiful city of Boston. It looks like our country, represented here today are Dreamers and doers, immigrants, people of every race and ethnicity, every gender identity, every sexual orientation, sisters rocking Senegalese twists and hijabs, lifelong learners from 18 to 88, disabled and able-bodied, veterans, military service men and women – patriots, not draft dodgers, critical thinkers, and community builders. In sum, do you know what we are and what we represent here today? Donald Trump's worst nightmare.

Let's give a round of applause again to our graduates, the parents, the aunties, the siblings, the families, the caregivers, and chosen families of these remarkable people and scholars. In a season of celebration and transition I am acutely aware that each of us carries with us a village. When you cross the stage this morning, graduates, you will carry with you personal histories and legacies, and the hopes and dreams of each person who played a role in your journey here.

I am proud and humbled to stand before you as your Congresswoman. Representing this district, the heart of which is the City of Boston. It is the joy and privilege of my life. And like each of you at a pivotal chapter in your life, my transition into this role has prompted me to reflect on those who have accompanied me in this improbable journey. I am thankful for everyone on that journey. Those who spoke my name, and dreamed of this stage, and sent up a prayer. And even those who doubted me and didn't believe in my potential. They each played a part in my story.

On some days, on my worst days, personally and in public life, throughout my 45-year journey, I recall there were some days, some moments, when I only had two words on my to-do list – get up. Sometimes that is the greatest victory in your day. But it was both my cheerleaders and the naysayers that compelled me to get up, and I know the same is true for all of you/

The one thing that doesn't come up in my standard biography but tells you everything you need to know about me is that I am first and foremost my mother's daughter. Sandy Pressley, my shero, may she rest in power. She was a remarkable woman. Growing up in the residual impacts of discriminatory policies like redlining and the war on drugs, she constantly reminded me that we were powerful. On election

day, she and I would pull that curtain closed at our local voting booth and we would stand in our power. She opened doors for me and she modeled a life well lived. A tenants' rights organizer, from the time I was a toddler on her hip, she taught me first hand that our destinies and our freedoms are tied. That a threat to anyone's rights are a threat to our own. And that working to strengthen our collective humanity is work that is real, and that is lasting, and true legacy.

Your presence here today is a testament to your perseverance and your will, but it is also a testament to the community, and the chosen family that has guided you along the way.

For me, the City of Boston has become my chosen home, my chosen family. I love this city. I love its grit and its drive. I love its skyline and its neighborhoods. I value its constant struggle to own its history - it's whole history, fix its eyes on the future and build together. More than anything, I love its people. If America is our great experiment in Democracy, maybe we should call Boston our great experiment in Community. We are not perfect, fault lines of racial divide and income inequality run through our city like lines drawn on the palms of our hands. And yet, we are constantly striving to move forward together. Each morning as day breaks across the city we take on work that is real. And each of you holds in your hands both the opportunity and the responsibility to take on that work.

My mother often reminded me that our job and our work are not always the same. For most, our job is what we do to pay the rent, the WORK is what we do to build and uplift community while we are here on this earth. I want you to leave here today knowing that whatever job awaits you when you cross this stage, your work is noble and dignified.

I'm often asked by those who aspire to run for public office for advice. And my answer is always the same – follow the work. Not the position or the title, crystalize and capitalize on what that work is for you. And capitalize it like it is your name. And give it honor and sweat equity. I'm reminded of the words of author, poet, and playwright Gwendolyn Brooks who, when an observer noted that every time she wrote 'black' she capitalized it and they said, 'why do you do that?' and she said, 'I always capitalize my name.'

Our work must become such a conflated part of our identity, of our lives purpose, that it is our name. And that we capitalize the W in our Work not only on a piece of paper, but in our life practice daily

In this city of ours, I hope that you find a place to make contributions and take pride in an honest days' work. I also implore you that regardless of your chosen profession don't lose sight of the work. Don't lose sight of the work that is real and enduring. The way we treat our neighbors. The way we raise our children. The moments that test our values and yet we still respond with grace. The little moments every day that define who we are as a community and what we are building.

This is the city where Coretta found her voice, where Kennedy challenged us to go to the moon, where Melnea Cass raised a generation of activists. Today we find ourselves at a crossroads as a nation and as a city as well. Today, graduates you are coming of age with a hopeful eye and a critical heart. Questioning

institutions that have come up short and working hard to build the infrastructure to do things differently for those who come up behind us.

I encourage you to be skeptical. Ask the question that changes the conversation. Shake the table. Upend the status quo. Just do not become cynical.

I've been in Congress 4 months. I'm asked every day, sometimes every hour, given the uncertain times, the unprecedented times we find ourselves in, if I'm becoming cynical. My reply is always the same--I don't have the luxury --and neither do any of us, do any of you.

In moments of darkness and in moments of light stay rooted in community. Remind yourself daily of who brought you to this stage. Remind yourself that you carry within you an innate source of power forged by their sacrifices and their dreams.

Remind yourself in moments when you want to throw your hands up that your hands are put to better use reaching for work, with a capital W, that is real. Grasping on to those moments of community and goodwill that each of us has an opportunity to shape daily. You hold in your hands the future of the nation, the future of this beautiful city. I believe in the very fiber of my being, that we are in good hands. So graduates now go--do good, do work, and do justice
Congratulations.

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